

5

DESIRABLE PEOPLE THE CANYON'S PECULIAR PAST

“Charles R. ‘Chuck’ Heath was born in March of 1938... The family lived on Farmdale Avenue, near the base of Laurel Canyon, close to where Studio City is located today.” Geoffrey Dunn, writing in [The Lies of Sarah Palin](#)
(Chuck Heath is Sarah Palin’s father)

UNTIL AROUND 1913, LAUREL CANYON REMAINED AN UNDEVELOPED SLICE of LA, a pristine wilderness area rich in native flora and fauna. That all began to change when Charles Spencer Mann and his partners began buying up land along what would become Laurel Canyon Boulevard, as well as on Lookout Mountain. A narrow road leading up to the crest of Lookout Mountain was carved out, and upon that crest was constructed a lavish seventy-room inn with sweeping views of the city below and the Pacific Ocean beyond. The Lookout Inn featured a large ballroom, riding stables, tennis courts and a golf course, among other amenities. But the inn, alas, would only stand for a decade; in 1923, it burned down, as tends to happen rather frequently in Laurel Canyon.

In 1913, Mann began operating what was billed as the nation’s first trackless trolley, to ferry tourists and prospective buyers from Sunset Boulevard up to what would become the corner of Laurel Canyon Boul-

evard and Lookout Mountain Avenue. Around that same time, he built a massive tavern/roadhouse on that very same corner. Dubbed the Laurel Tavern, the structure boasted a 2,000+ square-foot formal dining room, guest rooms, and a bowling alley on the basement level. The Laurel Tavern, of course, would later be acquired by Tom Mix, after which it would be affectionately known as the Log Cabin.

Shortly after the Log Cabin was built, a department store mogul (or a wealthy furniture manufacturer; there is more than one version of the story, or perhaps the man owned more than one business) built an imposing, castle-like mansion across the road, at the corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard and what would become Willow Glen Road. The home featured rather creepy towers and parapets, and the foundation is said to have been riddled with secret passageways, tunnels, and hidden chambers. The grounds of the estate were laced with trails leading to grottoes, elaborate stone benches, and hidden caves and tunnels.

Across Laurel Canyon Boulevard, the grounds of the Laurel Tavern/Log Cabin were also laced with odd caves and tunnels. As Michael Walker notes in *Laurel Canyon*, "Running up the hillside, behind the house, was a collection of man-made caves built out of stucco, with electric wiring and light bulbs inside." According to various accounts, one secret tunnel running under what is now Laurel Canyon Boulevard connected the Log Cabin, or its guesthouse, to the Houdini estate. This claim is frequently denounced as an urban legend, but given that both properties are known to possess unusual geological features, it's not hard to believe that the tunnel system on one property was connected at one time to the tunnel system on the other. The Tavern itself, as Gail Zappa would later describe it, was "huge and vault-like and cavernous."

With these two rather unusual structures anchoring an otherwise undeveloped canyon, and the Lookout Inn sitting atop uninhabited Lookout Mountain, Mann set about marketing the canyon as a vacation and leisure destination. The land that he carved up into subdivisions with names like "Bungalow Land" and "Wonderland Park" was presented as the ideal location to build vacation homes. But the new inn and roadhouse, and the new parcels of land for sale, definitely weren't for everyone. The roadhouse was essentially a country club, or what Jack Boulware of *Mojo* described as "a masculine retreat for wealthy men." And Bungalow Land was openly advertised as "a high class restricted

park for desirable people only.”

“Desirable people,” of course, tended to be wealthy people without a great deal of skin pigmentation.

As the website of the current Laurel Canyon Association notes, “restrictive covenants were attached to the new parcel deeds. These were thinly veiled attempts to limit ownership to white males of a certain class. While there are many references to the bigotry of the developers in our area, it would appear that some residents were also prone to bias and lawlessness. This article was published in a local paper in 1925:

“Frank Sanceri, the man who was flogged by self-styled ‘white knights’ on Lookout Mountain in Hollywood several months ago, was found not guilty by a jury in Superior Judge Shea’s courtroom of having unlawfully attacked Astrea Jolley, aged eleven.

“Wealthier residents were also attracted to Laurel Canyon: With the creation of the Hollywood film industry in 1910, the canyon attracted a host of ‘photoplayers,’ including Wally Reid, Tom Mix, Clara Bow, Richard Dix, Norman Kerry, Ramon Navarro, Harry Houdini and Bessie Love.”

The author of this little slice of Laurel Canyon history would clearly like us to believe that the “wealthier residents” were a group quite separate from the violent vigilantes roaming the canyon. The history of such groups in Los Angeles, however, clearly suggests otherwise. Paul Young, for example, has written in *LA Exposed* of Los Angeles’ early “vigilance committees, which stepped in to take care of outlaws on their own, often with the complete absolution of the mayor himself. Judge Lynch, for example, formed the Los Angeles Rangers in 1854 with some of the city’s top judges, lawyers, and businessmen including tycoon Phineas Banning of the Banning Railroad. And there was the Los Angeles Home Guard, another bloodthirsty paramilitary organization, made up of notable citizens, and the much-feared El Monte Rangers, a group of Texas wranglers that specialized in killing Mexicans. As one would expect, there was no regard for the victim’s rights in such kangaroo courts. Victims were often dragged from their homes, jail cells, even churches, and beaten, horse-whipped, tortured, mutilated, or castrated before being strung up on the nearest tree.”

Before moving on, I need to mention here that, of the eight celebrity residents of Laurel Canyon listed by the Association, fully half died under questionable circumstances, and three of the four did so on days

with occult significance. While Bessie Love, Norman Kerry, Richard Dix and Clara Bow all lived long and healthy lives, Ramon Navarro, as we have already seen, was ritually murdered in his home on Laurel Canyon Boulevard on the eve of Halloween, 1968. On January 18, 1923, matinee idol Wallace Reid was found dead in a padded cell at the mental institution to which he had been confined. Just thirty-one years old, Reid's death was attributed to his morphine addiction, though it was never explained how he would have fed that habit while confined to a cell in a mental hospital.

Tom Mix died on a lonely stretch of Arizona highway in the proverbial single-car crash on October 12, 1940 (the birthday of notorious occultist Aleister Crowley), when he quite unexpectedly encountered some temporary construction barricades that had been set up alongside a reportedly washed-out bridge. Although he wasn't speeding (by most accounts), Mix was nevertheless allegedly unable to stop in time and veered off the road, while a crew of what were described as "workmen" reportedly looked on. It wasn't the impact that killed Mix though, but rather a severe blow to the back of the head and neck, purportedly delivered during the crash by an aluminum case he had been carrying in the back seat of his car. There is now a roadside marker at the spot where Mix died. If you should happen to stop by to have a look, you may as well pay a visit to the Florence Military Reservation as well, since it's just a stone's throw away.

Harry Houdini died on Halloween day, 1926, purportedly of an attack of appendicitis precipitated by a blow to the stomach. The problem with that story, however, is that medical science now recognizes it to be an impossibility. According to a recent book about the famed illusionist—*The Secret Life of Houdini*, by William Kalush and Larry Sloman—Houdini was likely murdered by poisoning. Questions have been raised, the book notes, by the curious lack of an autopsy, an "experimental serum" that Houdini was apparently given in the hospital, and indications that his wife, Bess, may have been poisoned as well, though she survived. On March 23, 2007, an exhumation of Houdini's remains was formally requested by his surviving family members. It is unclear at this time when, or even if, that will happen.

Houdini's death, on October 31, 1926, came exactly eight years after the first death to occur in what would become known as the "Houdini

house.” In 1918, not long after the home was built, a lovers’ quarrel arose on one of the home’s balconies during a Halloween/birthday party. The gay lover of the original owner’s son reportedly ended up splattered on the ground below. According to legend, the businessman succeeded in getting his son off the hook, but only after paying off everyone he could find to pay off, including the trial judge. The aftermath of the party proved to be financially devastating for the family, and the home was apparently put up for sale.

Not long after that, as fate would have it, Harry Houdini was looking for a place to stay in the Hollywood area, as he had decided to break into the motion picture business. He found the perfect home in Laurel Canyon—the home that would, forever after, carry his name. By most accounts, he lived there from about 1919 through the early 1920s, during a brief movie career in which he starred in a handful of Hollywood films. A key scene in one of those films, *The Grim Game*, was reportedly shot at the top of Lookout Mountain, very near where the Lookout Inn then stood.

On October 31, 1959, precisely thirty-three years after Houdini’s death, and forty-one years after the unnamed party guest’s death, the distinctive mansion on the corner of Laurel Canyon Boulevard and Willow Glen Road burned to the ground in a fire of mysterious origin. (The ruins of the estate remain today, undisturbed for nearly fifty years.) On October 31, 1981, exactly twenty-two years after the fire across the road, the legendary Log Cabin on the other side of Laurel Canyon Boulevard also burned to the ground, in yet another fire of mysterious origin. (Some reports speculated that it was a drug lab explosion.) And twenty-five years after that, on October 31, 2006, *The Secret Life of Houdini* was published, challenging the conventional wisdom on Houdini’s death.

Far more compelling than the revelations about Houdini’s death, however, was something else about the illusionist that the book revealed for the first time: Harry Houdini was engaged in doing intelligence work for both the US Secret Service and Scotland Yard. And his traveling escape act, as it turns out, was pretty much a cover for those activities—in very much the same way that an actor by the name of John Wilkes Booth appears to have used his career as a traveling stage performer as a cover for intelligence operations. It is a time-honored tradition that seems to remain largely unchanged to this day.

The Sloman book, of course, doesn't make such reckless allegations about any performers other than Houdini. What the book does do, however, is compellingly document that Houdini was, in fact, an intelligence asset who used his magic act as a cover. Not only did the authors obtain corroborating documentation from Scotland Yard, they also received an endorsement of their claim from no less an authority than John McLaughlin, former Acting Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

It appears then, that, of the eight celebrity residents of Laurel Canyon listed on the Laurel Canyon Association website, at least two (Novarro and Houdini), and quite possibly as many as four, were murdered. That seems like a rather high homicide rate given that, statistically speaking, a white person in this country has about a one-in-345 chance of being murdered. Non-white persons, of course, have a far greater chance of becoming the victims of a homicide, but nowhere near the one-in-four to one-in-two odds that a white celebrity living in Laurel Canyon faced.

Statistically speaking, if you were a famous actor in the 1920s, you would have been better off playing a round of Russian Roulette than living in Laurel Canyon.

Anyway... two ambitious projects in the 1940s brought significant changes to Laurel Canyon. First, Laurel Canyon Boulevard was extended into the San Fernando Valley, providing access to the canyon from both the north and the south. The boulevard became a winding thoroughfare, providing direct access to the Westside from the Valley. Traffic, needless to say, increased considerably, which probably worked out well for the planners of the other project, because it meant that the increased traffic brought about by that other project probably wasn't noticed at all. And that's good, you see, because the other project was a secret one.

What would become known as Lookout Mountain Laboratory was originally envisioned as a fortified air defense center. Built in 1941 and nestled in two-and-a-half secluded acres off what is now Wonderland Park Avenue, the installation was hidden from view and surrounded by an electrified fence. By 1947, the facility featured a fully operational movie studio. In fact, it is claimed that it was the world's only completely self-contained movie studio. With 100,000 square feet of floor space, the covert studio included sound stages, screening rooms, film

WEIRD SCENES INSIDE THE CANYON

processing labs, editing facilities, an animation department, and seventeen climate-controlled film vaults. It also had a helicopter pad and a bomb shelter.

Over its lifetime, the studio produced some 19,000 classified motion pictures—more than all the Hollywood studios combined (which I guess makes Laurel Canyon the real ‘motion picture capital of the world’). Officially, the facility was run by the US Air Force and did nothing more nefarious than process AEC footage of atomic and nuclear bomb tests. The studio, however, was clearly equipped to do far more than just process film. There are indications that Lookout Mountain Laboratory had an advanced research and development department that was on the cutting edge of new film technologies. Such technological advances as 3-D effects were apparently first developed at the Laurel Canyon site. And Hollywood luminaries like John Ford, Jimmy Stewart, Howard Hawks, Ronald Reagan, Bing Crosby, Walt Disney, Hedda Hopper and Marilyn Monroe were given clearance to work at the facility on undisclosed projects. There is no indication that any of them ever spoke of their work at the clandestine studio.

The facility retained as many as 250 producers, directors, technicians, editors, animators, etc., both civilian and military, all with top security clearances—and all reporting to work in a secluded corner of Laurel Canyon. Accounts vary as to when the facility ceased operations. Some claim it was in 1969, while others say the facility remained in operation longer. In any event, by all accounts the secret bunker had been up and running for more than twenty years before Laurel Canyon’s rebellious teen years, and it remained operational for the most turbulent of those years.

The existence of the facility remained unknown to the general public until the early 1990s, though it had long been rumored that the CIA operated a secret movie studio somewhere in or near Hollywood. Film-maker Peter Kuran was the first to learn of its existence, through classified documents he obtained while researching his 1995 documentary *Trinity and Beyond*. And yet even today, nearly twenty years after its limited public disclosure, one would have trouble finding even a single mention of this secret military/intelligence facility anywhere in the ‘conspiracy’ literature.

I think we can all agree though that there is nothing the least bit

suspicious about a covert military facility operating in the epicenter of hippie culture, so let's move on.

In the 1950s, as Barney Hoskyns has written in *Hotel California*, Laurel Canyon was home to all "the hippest young actors," including, according to Hoskyns, Marlon Brando, James Dean, James Coburn and Dennis Hopper. It was home to Natalie Wood as well. In fact, Natalie lived in the very home that Cass Elliot would later turn into a Laurel Canyon party house. And like the home's later occupant, Wood died young under rather mysterious circumstances. As did, to a lesser extent, Canyonite James Dean. And as did, come to think of it, a few other people with very close ties to Canyonite Dennis Hopper.

Dean, Hopper's close friend and co-star, died in a near head-on collision on September 30, 1955, at the tender age of twenty-four. Then there was Nick Adams, who had formerly roomed with Hopper. Like Hopper, Adams had worked alongside James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. According to Dean himself, Adams had worked alongside Dean even earlier than that, when both were young male prostitutes working the mean streets of Hollywood. Adams died on February 6, 1968, at the age of thirty-six, in his home at 2126 El Roble Lane in Coldwater Canyon (one canyon west of Laurel Canyon, thus narrowly sparing Adams from a spot on the Laurel Canyon Death List).

Adams' official cause of death was listed as suicide, of course, but no one really seems to believe that. Actor Forrest Tucker has bluntly declared that, "All of Hollywood knows Nick Adams was knocked off." Nick's relatives reportedly received numerous hang-up calls on the day of his death, and his tape recorder, journals and various other papers and personal effects were conspicuously missing from his home. His lifeless body, sitting upright in a chair, was discovered by his attorney, Ervin "Tip" Roeder. On June 10, 1981, Roeder and his wife, actress Jenny Maxwell (best known for being spanked by Elvis in *Blue Hawaii*), were gunned down outside their Beverly Hills condo.

Next to fall was Sal Mineo, who, like Dean and Adams, had worked with Hopper on *Rebel Without a Cause* and remained a friend thereafter. Like Hopper, Mineo was a regular in the Sunset Strip clubs where the Doors, Love, the Byrds and the Mothers played. He had been alongside Hopper and Peter Fonda during the infamous 'riot' on the Sunset Strip in November 1966. And as has already been discussed, Mineo was

stabbed to death in close proximity to those very same clubs on February 12, 1976.

Last to fall was Natalie Wood, who also appeared in *Rebel Without a Cause* and who had at various times dated both Dennis Hopper and Nick Adams. Wood died on November 29, 1981, in a drowning incident off Catalina Island that has never been adequately explained. At the time, she was in the company of actors Robert Wagner and Christopher Walken. Natalie was forty-three when she was laid to rest.

Of the four actors stricken with what has been dubbed the “*Rebel Without a Cause* Curse,” two were former residents of Laurel Canyon, another lived at—and was killed at—the mouth of the canyon, and the fourth lived just a mile away, as the crow flies, in neighboring Coldwater Canyon. As I may have mentioned previously, Laurel Canyon seems to be a rather dangerous place to live.

The list of famous former residents of Laurel Canyon also includes the names W.C. Fields, Mary Astor, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, Errol Flynn, Orson Welles, and Robert Mitchum, who was infamously arrested on marijuana charges in 1948 at 8334 Ridpath Drive, the same street that would later be home to rockers Roger McGuinn, Don Henley and Glen Frey, as well as Paul Rothchild, producer of both the Doors and Love. Mitchum’s arrest, by the way, appears to have been a thoroughly staged affair that cemented his ‘Hollywood bad boy’ image and gave his career quite a boost, but I guess that’s not really relevant here.

Another famous resident of Laurel Canyon was science-fiction writer Robert Heinlein, who resided at 8775 Lookout Mountain Avenue. Like so many other characters in this story, Heinlein was a graduate of the US Naval Academy at Annapolis and he had served as a naval officer. After that, he embarked on a successful writing career. And despite the fact that he was, by any objective measure, a rabid right-winger, his work was warmly embraced by the flower-power generation.

If that capsule biography sounds vaguely familiar, by the way, it is probably because it is virtually identical to the biography of a guy named L. Ron Hubbard, whom you may have heard of.

Heinlein’s best-known work is the novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which many in the Laurel Canyon scene found to be hugely influential. Ed Sanders has written, in *The Family*, that the book “helped provide a theoretical basis for Manson’s Family.” Charlie frequently used *Strange*

Land terminology when addressing his flock, and he named his first family-born son Valentine Michael Manson in honor of the book's lead character.

David Crosby was a big Heinlein fan as well. In his autobiography, he references Heinlein on more than one occasion, and proclaims that, "In a society where people can go armed, it makes everybody a little more polite, as Robert Heinlein says in his books." Frank Zappa was also a member of the Robert Heinlein fan club. Barry Miles notes in his biography of the rock icon that his home contained "a copy of Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* and other essential sixties reading, including Robert Heinlein's sci-fi classic, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, from which Zappa borrowed the word 'discorporate' for [the song] *Absolutely Free*."

And that, fearless readers, brings us to the Laurel Canyon era that we are primarily concerned with, the wild and wooly 1960s. But before returning to that era, what conclusions can be drawn from this brief look at early canyon history? For one, it appears that murder and random acts of violence have been a part of the culture of the canyon since the earliest days of its development. It also appears that intelligence operatives posing as entertainers have likewise been a part of the canyon scene since the earliest days. And, finally, it seems that intelligence operatives who didn't even bother to pose as entertainers were streaming into the canyon to report to work at Lookout Mountain Laboratory for at least twenty years before the first rock star set foot there.

We are supposed to believe that all of the musical icons who settled in Laurel Canyon in the 1960s and 1970s just sort of spontaneously came together (one finds the word "serendipitous" sprinkled freely throughout the literature). But how many peculiar coincidences do we have to overlook in order to believe that this was just a chance gathering?

Let's suppose, hypothetically speaking, that you happen to be Jim Morrison and have recently arrived in Laurel Canyon and now find yourself fronting a band that is on the verge of taking the country by storm. Just a mile or so down Laurel Canyon Boulevard from you lives another guy who also recently arrived in Laurel Canyon, and who also happens to front a band on the verge of stardom. He happens to be married to a girl that you attended kindergarten with, and her dad, like yours, was involved in atomic weapons research and testing (Admiral George Morrison for a time did classified work at White Sands). Her husband's

dad, meanwhile, is involved in another type of WMD research: chemical warfare.

This other guy's business partner/manager is a spooky ex-Marine who just happens to have a cousin who, bizarrely enough, also fronts a rock band on the verge of superstardom. And this third rock-star-on-the-rise also happens to live in Laurel Canyon, just a mile or two from your house. Just down a couple of other streets, also within walking distance of your home, live two other kids who—wouldn't you know it?—also happen to front a new rock'n'roll band. These two kids happened to attend the same Alexandria, Virginia, high school that you attended, and one of them also attended Annapolis, just like your dad did, and just like your kindergarten friend's dad did.

Though almost all of you hail from the Washington, DC area, you now find yourselves on the opposite side of the country, in an isolated canyon high above the city of Los Angeles, where you are all clustered around a secret military installation. Given his background in research on atomic weapons, your father is probably familiar to some extent with the existence and operations of Lookout Mountain Laboratory, as is the father of your kindergarten friend.

The question that naturally arises here, I suppose, is this: What do you suppose the odds are that all of that just came together purely by chance?

When early installments of this story were posted online, I received a fair amount of negative feedback. Among other things, I was accused of inferring "guilt by association" and of engaging in "character assassination." One rather strident respondent complained that it was unfair to take a few isolated facts about an individual and use them to paint a sinister picture.

To some extent, these are valid complaints. And yes, it is fairly easy to gather together a few *different* isolated facts and use them to paint a much different portrait of these artists and pen an impassioned defense of any of them. (Jim Morrison and Frank Zappa seem to have the most rabid fans, by the way, in case anyone was wondering.) But what I ask is that you try to stand back and take in the big picture, and then ask yourself the following question: Exactly how many coincidences does it take to make a conspiracy?

And yes, by the way, I am very much aware of the fact that Jim Mor-

risson was fond of telling interviewers that his parents were dead, and that, according to legend, he did so because they were, in essence, dead to him. But as one photograph reveals, Jim's dad wasn't dead to him just months before his emergence as a rock star. The photo, reproduced at the front of this book, shows the two Morrisons on the bridge of the *USS Bon Homme Richard* in January 1964. It seems rather obvious to me that telling people that your parents are dead could be a very effective way of avoiding talking about who your father really is. It was such an effective strategy, in fact, that it took over four decades for the truth to finally come out.